
From Fear to Enlightenment: Building Resilience During Covid Year One



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The four tools and strategies top leaders used most to convert stress and anxiety into positive energy.

When I first saw the now-viral chart “Who do I want to be during COVID-19?” (an updated version is below), it resonated with my own journey. During the first two weeks of March 2020, I entered the fear zone: I was worried that my consulting and coaching business would crash. I felt helpless about postponed or cancelled projects, and I kept compulsively busy, trying to keep the “old normal” alive.

By the end of the second week, although some fear remained, I entered the learning zone, where I regained some serenity, started to make sense of the situation, talked with clients and colleagues, and checked my financial reserves. After a month, I felt more confident and entered the growth zone, e.g. investing in some research on organisational resilience and engaging in a major real estate project.

Yet, there was a final stage missing from the image: the enlightenment zone [1] where I could appreciate quality time with my family. This journey happened in an extremely privileged context with all my basic needs covered.

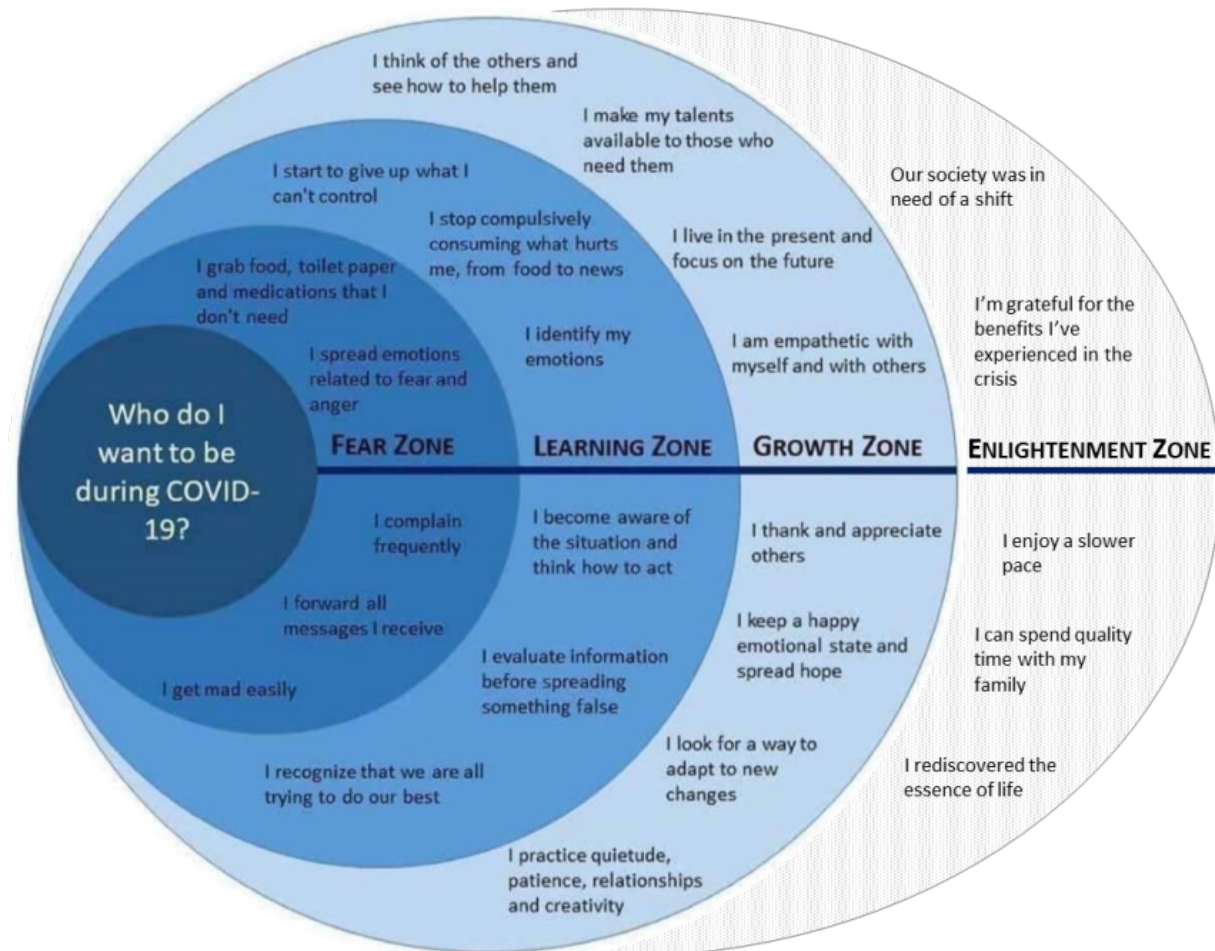


Figure 1: Who do I want to be during COVID-19 - Unknown author in blue and outer ring inspired by Suzanne Kobasa in grey

As we all prefer to be in growth and enlightenment, the question becomes how to ease and perhaps accelerate getting there. Leaving the fear zone is even more important for leaders because if they are stuck there, it creates even more confusion for the people who rely on them. Therefore, I wanted to better understand what helped them to do so. I conducted 42 formal interviews of CEOs and EVPs, 30 male and 12 female, mainly with P&L responsibilities (only two CHROs) in leading or large companies with an international scope (up to 160,000 employees). The leaders are based in

Belgium, France, Austria, the United States, Germany and Romania.

The secret lives of top leaders

These 42 leaders were asked to position themselves in the four zones over three distinct periods in 2020. My line of questioning was about their internal state (or private self), not what they were showing to others. The graph below shows that the journey towards the growth zone happened on average over several months. Note that 57 percent of leaders placed themselves in several zones at same time or cycling between them.

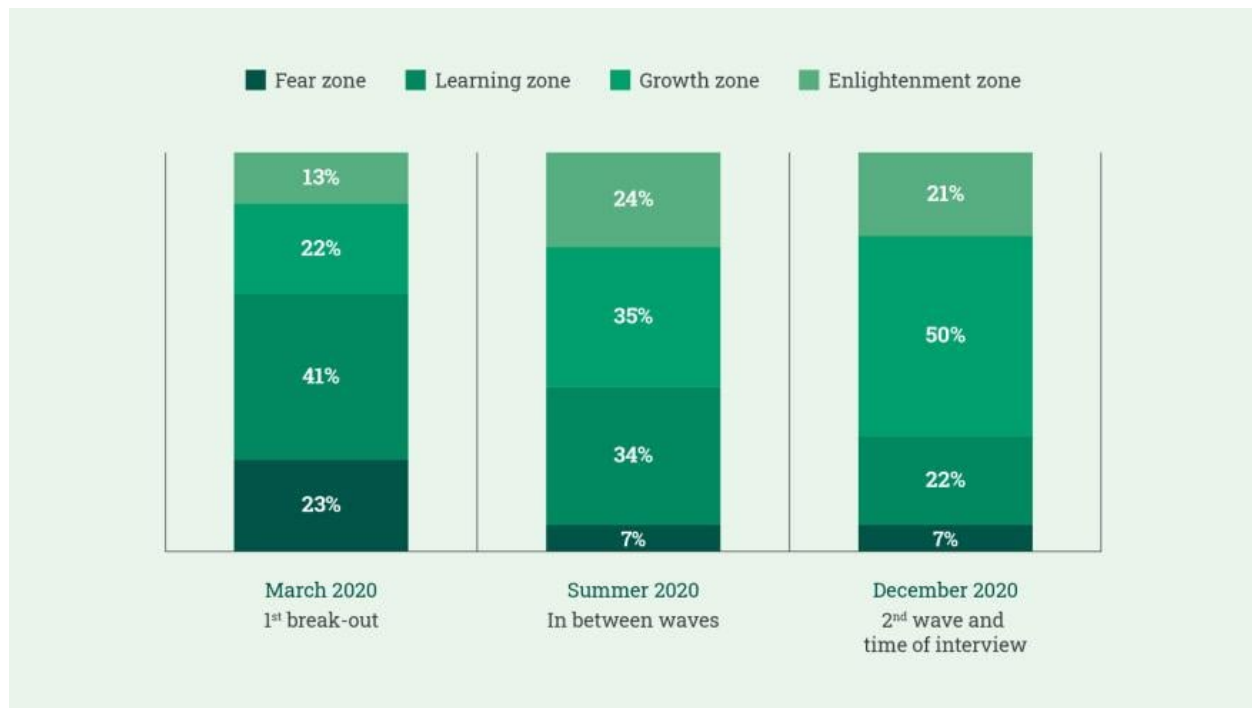


Figure 2: Leaders' self-declared position based on 42 interviews in December 2020

In March 2020, the fear was about health, safety (employees, parents, and elders), and sometimes their business, with great uncertainty and even a projected existential threat. The fear and learning zones are characterised by high mobilisation from psychological strain and anxiety. But only 6 percent of leaders in these zones described feeling less serenity or energy to pass on to others, indicating some defence mechanisms.

Those who went directly into the growth zone (with little or no fear) were all very experienced. For them, Covid-19 is one of many crises they have faced.

For some, the lockdown and forced WFH immediately triggered the joy of going “back to the essence, family” (enlightenment zone).

Over all zones in March, 30 percent of respondents said the crisis provided positive stimulation, with its avalanche of changes, decisions and mobilisation. Their appetite for problem solving, sometimes coupled with previous experience of crises, helps explain their self-described managerial response early on. These leaders said they were able to swiftly change gears, make sense of the situation and take action – e.g. setting up a crisis core team with daily meetings, communicating effectively and in a transparent manner, and shoring up cash reserves.

On average, the respondents reported shifting over time – some faster than others -- towards more growth and enlightenment. (The latter was higher over the summer because it was a more carefree moment than December when Covid fatigue set in.) Their fear, however, migrated as pandemic Year One wore on. At first, it revolved around short-term danger for people or business survival, but later it took on a wider scope and time horizon, encompassing issues such as potentially missed opportunities in a changing market or the societal impact of the deeper economic crisis. This may explain why 55 percent of executives reported a strong focus on long-term projects, whether ongoing or newly initiated.

Remember that these results are based on self-declared stories, or *personal narratives*. Like any first-person story, the possibility of an unreliable narrator should be accounted for. For example, almost all the leaders claimed to have adopted sound crisis management and contained anxieties across their organisations. One could reasonably question whether their employees would agree. However, the aim of my project was to trace how leaders used personal narratives, regardless of their veracity, to navigate out of the fear zone.

Mechanisms for resilience

All leaders interviewed shared the practices they employed to manage personal anxiety and restlessness. Figure 3 below gives an overview of their choices and actions, grouped into four categories. The darker and larger the category, the more frequently it was raised.

Note that this overview does not review the leaders’ intrinsic personality traits, which also have a major influence on their resistance to stress. My angle is behavioural, focused on actual choices that leaders can make.

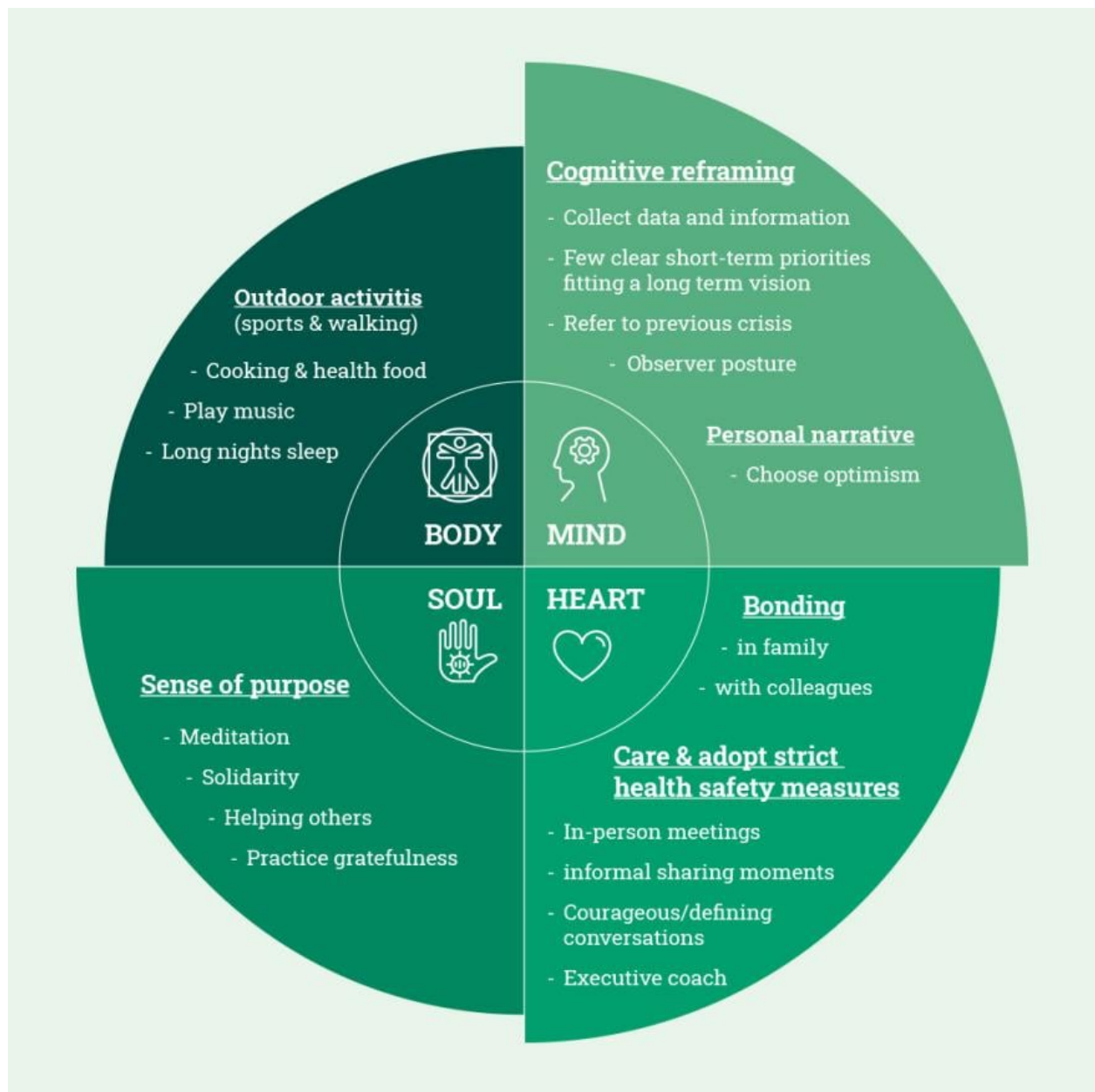


Figure 3: Self-resilience active mechanisms

Although each mechanism is worth an explanation with an illustration, I will focus here on the most frequently shared.

Cognitive reframing was by far the most frequent and effective mechanism cited in my research. The art of reframing is in the ability to put the Covid-19 crisis into perspective and interpret the facts in a less threatening manner. Here are few concrete ways:

- Develop the worst-case scenario to see whether the crisis poses an existential threat for the company (bankruptcy); for most, it did not. When it did, this exercise also revealed the steps needed to dodge disaster (no interviewee experienced this worst case).
- Take the “helicopter view” of the crisis, make sense of the events, and define a trajectory. A powerful question was shared: “How do you want to remember this exceptional period in the future?”
- Read to broaden your perspective. Business books don’t count. Some leaders explored philosophical or scientific topics (including social sciences). The quirkiest recommendation was *The Subtle Art of Not Giving a F*ck* by Mark Manson.

Bonding with teammates and close family was mentioned by most leaders as healing and calming. Besides the feeling of togetherness in the eye of the storm, sharing with each other relieves stress and changes perspective (enabling cognitive reframing). Each in their own ways, the interviewees invested deeply in connecting with their family or close colleagues.

Acting for the *health and safety* of their family and colleagues was crucial in reducing worries. Government rules were followed at a minimum, if not augmented by additional precautions such as foregoing travel in summertime. Leaders thereby had less anxiety about risks they might be running, leaving more bandwidth for the needs of their business.

Creating a *sense of purpose* in the pandemic was common among leaders who landed quickly in the growth zone and declared good business resilience (including increased market share). The purpose was not necessarily restricted to the firm itself. It could be anything from saving employees’ jobs, to producing and donating hydroalcoholic gel to the community. Having a worthy goal in mind helped convert stress into positive energy.

Boosting personal resilience is a leader’s first responsibility

As captains of industry in this storm, respondents saw it as their job to keep the ship at least on an even keel and, where possible, to turn difficulties into an opportunity. Their sense of responsibility remains high, and they have learned from their personal journey towards the growth/enlightenment zone. Deliberately or intuitively, all deployed one or more of the above mechanisms to raise personal resilience, and thereby fulfil their leadership mandate.

When I invited leaders in my network to participate in this survey, I counted on a 10-15 percent positive response, assuming top executives would be reluctant to reflect upon fear. Instead, I received an 84 percent reply rate, likely indicating an appetite for discussing the question “As a leader, how have I dealt with anxiety?” As Churchill said, “Never waste a good crisis”.

The author thanks [Noah Askin](#), Assistant Professor of Organisational Behaviour, for his oversight and feedback.

[1] Embracing the upsides of change and of the journey through difficulties. Ingredients are gratitude, joie de vivre and faith in the future. It is based on Suzanne Kobasa’s work on psychological hardiness (1979).

Find article at

<https://knowledge.insead.edu/leadership-organisations/fear-enlightenment-building-resilience-during-covid-year-one>

About the author(s)

Lionel Frankfort received a Master in Consulting and Coaching for Change from INSEAD (EMCCC’17).

About the series

Covid-19

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